

THE STARTING POINT for Harnessing Magazine Audience Data

In a short time, data has become an imperative for magazine publishers. It's become a key differentiator between legacy publishers that drive revenue on a per-product basis and those that are able to monetize audiences across platforms and brands. And with greater data sophistication comes the ability to extract otherwise untapped audience insights that can yield new product development and capture bigger deals by driving advertiser ROI upward.

Yet developing a strategy for capitalizing on audience data can be intimidating or even mystifying. With all the buzz that surrounds “big data,” it can be hard to know where to begin.

This guide will provide a starting point for harnessing the power of audience data to meet magazine publishers' business objectives. That entails identifying key data objectives, gathering the many sets of data you already have (email, circulation, event, e-learning, ecommerce, etc.), putting that data in one spot, and placing the tools “on top” of that database to extract insights and take actions that will improve your organization. In practice, this will typically mean collecting all of your audience data into a unified audience database, and implementing some tools, such as marketing automation, email marketing, or analytics, that enable you to leverage that database.

This is not intended to be an exhaustive step-by-step guide for building a database or implementing technology, but rather an effort to make audience data strategies more accessible and provide an entry point for magazines publishers that want turn their data into a true business asset.

THE STARTING POINT

ESTABLISH YOUR BUSINESS OBJECTIVES BY ASKING QUESTIONS

We all know that audience data holds tremendous business value. It can reveal valuable insights about audience interests and content consumption that can improve everything from editorial decision making to new product development. It can yield direct revenue from marketers seeking ever-more-targeted consumer niches or qualified B2B prospects. It can help cut down on costly email list opt-outs. But where does one begin the process of harnessing the power of audience data?

The best place to start is to establish what the business objectives are for collecting any and all audience data. Basically, ask yourself what types of audience data you will be able to monetize or use to enhance your business. The answer to this question should help shape your data strategy. It will tell you what type of data you should collect, why you should collect it, and the criteria you need to meet. If you can envision what in your existing data set could align with your business goals you'll also be able to start determining the potential ROI for your data initiatives.

By continuously asking why you're collecting any given data, who you're trying to get information about, and what you're going to do with it, you'll get to the core of your data objectives. For a very basic example, ask yourself why you want to collect demographic data about readers. Likely, the reason for asking for demographic data is so you can offer specific people products and services based on who they are.

In any market you can speculate on what the audience's interests are and what they want to consume, or what advertisers goals are and what they are willing to pay for. In the enthusiast publishing space, you might want to ask your audience about their personal interests. If you published a guitar-playing magazine, for example, you might ask about skill level or preferred type of guitar. Why? So you could offer paid video guitar lessons based on skill level or target an acoustic guitar manufacturer's ads to the right people.

If you're in the B2B space, you probably already ask about individuals' title and company revenue because it's an indication of what kinds of products they'd be interested in and whether they're a decision maker. But what other data could you ask for that aligns with your business objectives? Like dominoes each question should lead to an answer and another question about the data you collect and why.

Essentially what you're doing is considering the personas within your audience that

SOME COMMON OBJECTIVES FOR AUDIENCE DATA:

- To be able to monitor user behavior across platforms, products, and brands in order to reveal new audience insights.
- To have a 360-degree view of one's audience and be able to segment and target products, services, and client marketing campaigns.
- To take greater responsibility for and monetize the quality first-person user data publishers sit on.
- To decrease workflow redundancies and become more efficient in managing data and audience communication.

could be valuable to you and reverse engineering to inform what data you collect and its potential business value. By no means do you have to determine once and for all what data you collect from readers and stick with that—you can always ask for more information later on or reprioritize certain data points as your business and market evolves. And of course you're already making these considerations as you sell advertisers based on *who* is in your audience. So this task may seem basic, but thinking this way forces you to get to the core your audience data objectives and should guide you forward throughout the process.

CONSIDER YOUR DATA APPLICATIONS

A good example of a publisher anticipating the business value of its audience data is medical information and continuing education publisher AHC Media. With the expectation that the company's traditional subscription revenues will decline, AHC CEO and Publisher David Fournier is preparing the company to better leverage its audience data to drive new revenue.

Where previously most of AHC's content was behind a firewall, it has re-launched its site to drive more traffic and develop online audience, with the end goal of collecting more demographic data about its audience. That means being able to collect, append, and organize audience data and then target specific audience segments. Fournier says

this will enable him to target content, such as AHC's 4 e-newsletters devoted to respective medical specialties, as well as serve advertiser targeting objectives. "Down the road I'm going to want to be able to tell people who I'm going to try to sell sponsorships or advertising to, 'Here are the people in my database, they are specifically interested in orthopedics, so your new splint technology is something you'll want to advertise to them.'"

Where many people can get tripped up with data is with the intimidating notion of "big data" and all that it entails. Yet it's the bits and pieces of "little data" you collect that effectively transform into what "big data" can do, especially for a small or mid-sized company.

Fournier recommends that publishers collect audience data early and often. “At the earliest point, you have to start collecting information, start getting it. Don’t make an excuse not to, because the longer you wait the harder and harder it gets. And you can’t get it all at once – you’re going to have to get it in drips and drabs. But at some point you’ll find out why it’s of value and how you can put it to use.”

Joyce Neth, Vice President, Director of Audience Development & Research for Watt Global Media suggests starting the process by imaging how you want to apply your data. “Start at the end,” says Neth. “Have a vision for how you want to apply the data. Our vision was very basic: to understand how our audience engaged in our content. We pursued the image of a Venn diagram: three circles representing the set engaged in print, digital, and events. What is the value of the intersections and what is the value of those engaged in single channels?”

“Again, start with the end in mind,” continues Neth. “Consider use cases for different departments: editorial, sales, audience, marketing, and even finance. Think of how the database will be used and that will guide how you build it. Talk to other people who have databases about how they are using theirs.”

Neth says Watt Global has created a consolidated audience database and is now looking toward leveraging that data, particularly behavioral data for new product development and personalized content delivery.

From the outset enthusiast media company Active Interest Media had some key objectives in mind for its data strategy. Perhaps most important was the ability to harness audience data for more targeted and hence more effective marketing programs. “The blanketing approach to marketing is gone,” says Amanda Phillips, Lead Generation Marketing Director for Active Interest Media. “There has to be very individual targets to focus marketing campaigns whether that be for subscription offers or that be sponsored content marketing campaign for a client or advertiser. You can’t just batch and blast anymore. Everything needs to be approached with strategy behind it and this is allowing us to do that.”

Effective segmentation and targeting of campaigns requires the ability to see and reach individuals across multiple platforms and brands. Phillips offers an example of this concept in action: “So we’ve got a Yoga Journal subscriber and we can see that they’re always looking at vegetarian recipes on our websites. We’ve offered them a Vegetarian Times subscription because we make that connection.”

Previously Active Interest had a database of record for its audience but it didn’t offer a unified audience view and include email and web behaviors, for example. In early 2015, the company decided to build a robust audience database that would reach across the entire company.

SURVEY YOUR DATA

ESTABLISH A DATA TEAM

Several publishers interviewed for this paper made the strong recommendation to assemble a *small* team to lead data strategy: to identify and prioritize key business objectives, manage data assets, and oversee implementation of various tools.

Phillips says Active Interest pulled together a five-person team with stakeholders from across the company. “That team of five started pulling together needs and wants, taking into consideration the goals that had

been put in front of us as far as AIM was concerned. Then, underneath that, looking at what we needed to have to accomplish those goals. Then, we pulled together an RFP process to help find a solution provider to take the next step.” Phillips says this process took about eight months to complete.

The team that Active Interest assembled consisted of a variety of backgrounds, including expertise in marketing and lead generation, audience development (circulation, email

list), web development, online education, paid events, all overseen by Jonathan Dorn, Active Interest's Senior Vice President of Digital and Data.

Philips emphasizes that if a publisher has someone on staff with experience with data management or implementing a marketing automation or email marketing tool, it can really help save a lot of effort. Having several

members with these types of experience on the team, Philips says they were able to ask a lot of the right questions upfront and avoid potential potholes.

Neth says that it's also important to determine who "owns" the database. For Watt Global Media, it's the audience development department.

TAKE INVENTORY OF YOUR DATA & COLLECT EXAMPLES

Of course, you're already collecting lots of data on your audience, mostly based around specific product offerings, such as a magazine subscription. And most likely you have many more data sources, such as event registration, newsletter sign-ups, additional magazine subscriptions, and more.

Often, a publisher's circulation file is its most structured data, with a system for updating and changing records in place. The problem is that this data often stands alone in a silo when what needs to occur is data unification. The power of data is seeing where it intersects – for example, you can start to see the many products a single person engages with, as in Philips' Yoga Journal-Vegetarian Times example above.

According to Andy Kowl, Senior VP of Publishing Strategy at ePublishing, disconnected data is a very common challenge for publishers. "Almost every publisher I speak with has three to five databases. Subscriptions are sent to fulfillment; e-newsletters are handled by the ESP. If there is site registration in addition to newsletters, it's usually separate. Events, white papers, webinars, they're always separate databases. Start by combining them best you can. One five-title pub-

lisher I spoke with had seven separate lists. She still does today."

The process of getting your data in one spot starts with doing an inventory of all your data assets. And that means making a list. Whether you'll partner with a vendor for the actual construction of a unified database or do it internally, you'll need to create this list, says Philips. "In order to even find a vendor [to clean up our data], we had to literally make a list of the data sources that we had."

And to go hand in hand with that list of data sources are examples of each. Whoever is going to ultimately centralize your data is going to need to know what they're working with.

This inventory process, while basic, should be done thoroughly. Have everyone on your data team pitch in and make sure nothing is going overlooked. "It is a huge undertaking," says Philips, "because you think, "Oh, I can sit here and name the five points of data coming in," but then you realize, "Oh wait that's seven. No that's ten. Wait there's twelve different places the data is coming from." And it all looks different. The formatting is different. The file types are different. The schedule of how [the data] shoots out is different."

GET IT TOGETHER

The biggest challenge of harnessing audience data is not capturing the data. Publishers are sitting on oodles of data. Organizing that glut of data and putting it into a useful order is the challenge.

In layman's terms, you need to get your data in one spot and clean it up. In only slightly more technical terms, that means it's time to start building your database, which is

a well-structured and organized set of data that is as uniformly formatted and as complete as possible. Cleaning up data could include such things as using third party data services to take an incomplete user profile (first name and email address) and appending that profile with additional information (last name, title, job function).

This is likely the time you'd go one of two

routes: handle your database build in-house or seek a partner to take care of this. Either way you decide to go, following is a very cursory overview of what will go into constructing a database.

Again in as simple terms as is possible, the data needs to be “cleaned” and structured, which means appending incomplete data sets, perhaps with the use of third party data, getting the data into uniform formats, and connecting the various sets of data so they function together. You’ll need at the very least some substantial database expertise in your organization to execute this properly and in a timely manner (database building, management, and maintenance). Based on their existing in-house resources many, but certainly not all, magazine publishers choose to outsource parts of or all of this work.

Also, the amount of work required to get your data into a unified database will vary

greatly depending on your specific business, the amount of data you’re working with, the amount of data sources, and the overall condition of your various data assets.

Though it might be easy to say, “Well this is something only the giants can afford to do,” that’s not necessarily the case. Larger companies have to reckon with much larger amounts of data, often spread over disparate systems and brands. It’s really a challenge for one and all, and one that’s relatively scaled to each business.

Active Interest, for example, is a company built on acquisitions, which means as it has acquired and incorporated company after company, it acquired new databases in different formats and new data sources. “We had to find a solution that could pull all that together,” says Philips. “It’s painful but it’s necessary and in the end we’ll all breathe a sigh of relief at this time next year I’m sure.”

ENABLE INSIGHT & ACTION WITH DATA TOOLS

Once you have a database in place, the next step will be to harness its power with tools that enable you to draw insight and take action, such as marketing automation, email marketing, and website and audience analytics dashboards.

Often the same vendors that can build a unified database also offer these tools. Choosing a vendor for such things will be a lengthy and work intensive task, but with clear objectives in mind and your data inventory in hand, you’ll be ahead of the game. This preparation will also enable you to make better decisions as you prioritize the investments you make in insight and action tools.

Prioritizing these investments will be where your data team comes back into play, determining what’s in the overall best interest of the company. For example, consider how a solution provider will handle email deployment and marketing automation, whether it

can handle your data load, whether it offers website behavior tracking, or if it provides the big picture 360-degree view of the audience.

“Prioritizing these objectives was key, says Philips. “We knew we had to have a database no matter what we did so we had to have someone who can do the database. We can’t live in this world without an email solutions provider. We couldn’t be a publisher without it. Those came up as the top two. Then the marketing automation and the big picture view I would say were the next level and then the website behavior tracking was the next level.”

Active Interest ultimately selected a vendor that offered a soup-to-nuts solution—from database construction to the full spectrum of tools. However, Philips emphasizes this is certainly not the only way to go. “That’s a lot to ask of any of these companies who are out there.”

The above overview is intended to be a high-level overview of how a publisher can approach the challenge of harnessing its audience data. Hopefully it offers a starting point for getting your audience data in order and setting your path forward.